



**Comhairle Contae
Dhún na nGall**
Donegal County Council



donegal diaspora
pobal domhanda



The fifth annual Donegal-Irish Diaspora Conference took place at Letterkenny Institute of Technology, (LYIT) Co Donegal on 19th and 20th May 2016. Hosted by Donegal County Council (DCC) and in association with the University of Massachusetts Lowell (UMass Lowell), the conference was addressed by a panel of distinguished speakers from the USA, Scotland and Ireland.

To mark the national commemoration of the Easter Rising, the theme of the Conference was prompted by the Proclamation of 1916....*'she now seizes that moment.... supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe'*...



The Conference was formally opened by Cathaoirleach Cllr Ciaran Brogan who outlined some of the measures which have been undertaken since the first Conference in 2012. He stressed that the global community is a key resource for

the county and its people all over the world. As a result of the Donegal Diaspora Project, there has been an effective promotion of inward investment, tourism, cultural links and educational research.



The moderator of the Conference was Victoria Denoon, who is Co-Director of the Centre for Irish Partnerships at UMass Lowell. In an overview of the proceedings, she introduced the key elements of the trans-Atlantic partnerships being promoted by the University. She highlighted the contribution of the Irish community in Lowell, particularly their role in constructing the canal system that powered the textile mills that gave birth to the American Industrial Revolution. With reference to the main theme, she also indicated that speakers would address a range of issues relating to 1916 and its importance to Ireland, Scotland and America.

Scotland and the 1916 Rising

Sir Tom Devine, Emeritus Professor, University of Edinburgh, who is one of Scotland's premier historians, explored the relevance of the Easter Rising and its impact on the Irish Catholic community in Scotland. First, he established the context in which the host community interacted with a wave of Irish immigrants in the wake of the Great Famine. Second, he outlined the response of the Catholic community to the Rising and the "chain reaction" that followed and third, he spoke about the legacy that was left in the aftermath of the Rising.

In setting the context, he noted that the Census of 1901 recorded 200,000 first generation Irish in Scotland with a concentration in large cities such as Glasgow



and Dundee. Over 400,000 people in Scotland claimed Irish descent. While the immigrants of the 1840s and 1850s faced intense hostility, in the decades before 1916, there was a "new, grudging toleration", as the economy expanded and workers found employment in the

booming ship-building sector and other industries. Consequently, the Catholic population posed little threat to the establishment.

There was immediate condemnation of the 1916 rebels but as news of events in Ireland reached Scotland, a metamorphosis took place among the Irish Catholic community following the executions of the leaders, the imposition of martial law and actions of the Black and Tans. Within months of the Rising, Sinn Féin was in the ascendant.

The aftermath of the Rising was a watershed in Scottish history as constitutionalism was replaced by a more radicalised nationalism which drew the ire of the Scottish press. By 1918, the status of Irish Catholics had improved as the Catholic Church secured significant victories in education. The Church of

Scotland resented such concessions and demanded the immediate repatriation of the Irish. Subsequently, tensions waned and by the 1930s Irish Catholics had earned a measure of upward mobility as the tide of anti-sectarianism gradually receded in subsequent decades. Sir Tom concluded by stressing that the Easter Rising could not be written off as a mere footnote in Scottish history; instead, it had deep significance for the political, social and economic welfare of the Irish Catholic community in Scotland.

Jacobitism and 1916

The origins of the Easter Rising are deeply embedded in Irish history, and this was the theme of the lecture by Dr Éamonn Ó Ciardha, of Ulster University. His paper explored the importance of Irish Jacobitism, which is defined as Irish support for the exiled Stuarts. In a wide -ranging review of Irish Jacobite



history from 1603, he stated that elements of Jacobitism can be found in eighteenth century Irish letters. With the onset of the Celtic Revival in the late nineteenth century, organisations such as Conradh na Gaeilge revived many of the old Jacobite traditions which in turn

influenced culture and politics in Ireland in the decade before 1916. Dr. Ó Ciardha illustrated how the Revivalists adapted Jacobite traditions for Irish purposes by reference to the song “Ó ró ‘sé do bheatha abhaile”, a popular Jacobite marching song from Ulster. The lyrics were popularised by the Irish Volunteers and were sung in the ruins of the GPO in 1916 and by soldiers during the War of Independence. Ó Ciardha’s thesis supported his argument that the Easter Rising of 1916 could be categorised as “the last Jacobite Rebellion”.

The revolutionary generation

The social, political and economic changes that took place in Donegal in the decades before and after the Easter Rising were examined by Professor Breandán Mac Suibhne, Centenary College, New Jersey in his wide-ranging



lecture on Republicanism in west Ulster. Drawing mainly on the works of Joseph Lee, Roy Foster and Conor Cruise O'Brien, he compared and contrasted the lives of people in Donegal of the so-called "Famine generation" and "the Land League generation" with those of the "revolutionary generation" of 1916 and beyond. Roy Foster commented that the men and women who made the Irish revolution were different to their parents while Ernie O'Malley claimed they owed allegiance to the dead generations and formed a sense of communion with them after the execution of the 1916 leaders. In west

Donegal, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Mac Suibhne argued that the living were walking away from the dead because of the impact of migration and cultural change. Michael Collins dispatched Ernie O'Malley to Donegal in October 1918 to organise the IRA companies and prepare for war. O'Malley remained in the county until February 1919 but while he liked the people, O'Malley experienced frustration in his efforts to organise companies of the IRA to train for battle. Despite his frustrations, the republican tradition remained strong and there was a belief that a new dawn lay ahead.

A gun-running love affair

Departing from serious political and economic affairs, Kevin Cullen, an award-winning *Boston Globe* columnist, entertained Conference attendees with the gun-running love story of Erskine and Molly Childers. The story of the Asgard yacht is well-known but the details of the love affair between Molly Osgood and Erskine Childers have dropped below the radar. Cullen traced the story of



their whirlwind romance, their wedding in Boston, the drama of the gun-running at Howth and their lives subsequent to the Easter Rising. He also referred to the role of two Gola fishermen, Patrick Duggan and Patrick McGinley in delivering the guns and ammunition. The love story

ended tragically with the execution of Childers in the Irish Free State which he helped to establish.



Open Forum

Members of the audience engaged in a lively question and answer session with a panel which consisted of Paul Hannigan, President of LYIT, Marty Meehan, President of the University of Massachusetts and a

former United States Congressman, Dr Éamonn Ó Ciardha, Senior Lecturer in the School of English, History and Politics, Ulster University, Kevin Cullen, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist from the *Boston Globe* and Dr Seán Beattie, Chairman of the Ulster Local History Trust. Moderator was Victoria Denoon and the theme was based on a quotation from a speech by President Michael D. Higgins in which he commented on what the Proclamation envisaged and how we have the opportunity to live in a more inclusive society. Questions ranged over a number of subjects including the Erasmus programme, cooperation between third level institutions in Ireland, issues relating to the JI Visa programme and Brexit.

Book launch

During the Conference, a new publication, “**Material Culture of Donegal Communities Abroad**” was launched. The book forms part of the implementation of the County Donegal Heritage Plan in association with the Heritage Council and County Donegal Heritage Forum. The second in a series, it presents an overview of historical migration patterns to America, Canada, Scotland and England. Speakers were introduced by Dr Joseph Gallagher, editor of the publication and Heritage Officer of DCC; they included Dr Jonathan Bell and Mervyn Watson, both of whom are agricultural historians, Dr Patrick Fitzgerald of the Ulster American Folk Park, Dr Caoimhín MacAoidh and Dr Fidelma Mullane, all of whom are contributors to the book. Music was

provided by renowned Donegal fiddler Danny Meehan and Caoimhín Mac Aoidh.

Remembrance

Professor Paul Arthur, Ulster University, highlighted complex issues relating to memory and ethical remembrance and how to distinguish memory and remembrance. He commenced his lecture with an overview of key events in European history with reference to well-known figures such as President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Éamonn de Valera. In recalling the past, he warned against the possibility of “mis-memory” and the deliberate creation of a false



official memory, citing the Widgery Tribunal as an example. There was also the danger of memory being used for political purposes. Turning to remembrance, he emphasised that different criteria applied: recognition should be given to what actually happened. In this respect,

the arts and literature had a part to play and he cited works by Sebastian Barry, Jennifer Johnston and Buncrana-born Frank McGuinness.

Boston politics

The city of Boston has offered refuge to many Irish immigrants over the centuries and a descendent of one such immigrant family from Inishowen, Michael Patrick McDonald offered an insight into some of the challenges he faced growing up in a district which experienced the highest concentration of white poverty in America. An award-winning author, he is currently Author in



Residence at Northeastern University. He read extracts from his book “All Souls” which illustrated how his work as a community facilitator has enabled him to overcome the challenges of living in a district beset by serious social issues and how he learned to find a voice in a community of silence.



Election USA

Current affairs provided the focus for a lecture by Dr Francis Talty, Centre of Irish Partnerships at UMass Lowell and Assistant Dean. In a very balanced lecture, he outlined the major features of the policies currently offered by the two candidates for the

Presidency, Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton and the vagaries of the American Presidential voting system. In a discussion with the audience following the lecture, it became evident that undocumented workers would come under more scrutiny.

Minister McHugh

Following his appointment as Minister for the Diaspora and Overseas Aid by An Taoiseach, Enda Kenny the previous day, Minister Joe McHugh addressed the Conference in what was his first official engagement in his new post. He congratulated DCC on the success of the Diaspora Project and assured the Council of his full support for their work in this field.





Conclusion

At the conclusion of the Conference, the CEO of DCC, Seamus Neely welcomed Minister McHugh and wished him well in his new appointment. Mr McNeely reinforced the comments made by the Chairman of DCC at the opening of the event. He summarised the mutual benefits of the Diaspora Project and the importance of strengthening the ongoing relationships which provided an invaluable learning experience. Looking to the future, he believed the Project would help to develop tourism, initiate new investment in enterprise and promote cultural, educational, economic and perhaps philanthropic

linkages. He applauded the success of existing programmes citing the annual Tip O'Neill Award together with the annual lecture and the participation of DCC in the Golden Bridges Award. Thanking everyone involved in the success of the Conference which drew widespread support from the community, he paid tribute to DCC staff who have been to the forefront in developing the Diaspora Project, particularly Michael Heaney, Eileen Burgess, Directors of Services and Aideen Doherty, Area Manager, who was involved in planning the Conference and acted as facilitator throughout. Aideen Doherty thanked Victoria Denoon for her work as Moderator, all the speakers, panellists and her colleagues for their assistance and cooperation, with a special thanks to Paul Hannigan and his staff at LYIT.

Dr Seán Beattie.

